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XII.—*American Literature in the Class-room.*

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The increased attention to the study of American Literature in our higher institutions, and the want of any good text-book to assist the teacher, seem to warrant the discussion here of the subject which I have ventured to bring before you, and which, I am well assured, holds a considerable place in the thought of many teachers of English. If there seem to be but little that is original in the following brief outline, and indeed much that is not new, it has nevertheless seemed to me worth while to emphasize the educational capabilities of our own literature and perhaps to suggest method in the study of it. It is certainly discreditable to us that we have done so little toward a faithful and affectionate study of what is purely native and national in our American writings. The text-books intended for use in our schools are, for the most part, sadly incapable. They are without critical ability, and are constructed usually upon the same pattern :—a number of names of greater or less eminence in several departments of intellectual activity are set down in chronological order, with a few lines of biography concerning each. There is rarely any sense of proportion, the same space is given to a wretched poetaster like JAMES GATES PERCIVAL as to RALPH WALDO EMERSON. TYLOR'S 'History of American Literature' is a permanent honor to American scholarship; a skilful and laborious examination of all the literary remains before 1765. PROFESSOR RICHARDSON'S unfinished 'American Literature' contains much that is interesting, but we still need for class use, a book from which teachers can teach, and from which students cannot 'cram.'

Is it because it is so *perilously modern* that we shrink from making of our literature a theme for public instruction? Is it because its language offers no peculiar attraction to the grammarian that certain learned and successful masters of English pronounce the subject to be "so unsatisfactory"? Or is it that our Literature is really so sterile and so empty of all stimulating thought and ideal interest that it need not enter

seriously into the scheme of study of those even who have classes in eighteenth and nineteenth century English? I fancy I see in the opposition where it exists, to the introduction into our old schools and colleges of the literature of America, the misconception of the aim and character of literary study. When one of the most scholarly of English statesmen and a profound student of history and literature, said to me recently that the expansion of English in the school and college curriculum had proved a failure, and that a return to the classics could alone save *education* from declining into mere *information*, his reason was not far to seek: the *language* in which the greatest literature of the world is contained does not offer stubborn enough resistance to the student to develop and discipline his mental fibre, and it was impossible for the scholar I have quoted to conceive of literature as a study apart from language. It seemed like a confession of a similiar view when a grammarian was recently elected to the Merton Professorship of English Language and Literature in Oxford, and it will be remembered that PROFESSOR FREEMAN in his defense of the electors clearly and candidly expressed his inability to see in Literature a distinct field of study. MR. CHURTON COLLINS in the *Nineteenth Century* for November, 1887, accepted the challenge of the historian and answered in the affirmative, positively and intelligently, the question "Can English Literature be taught?" We have problems enough in the progress of a nation's thought and literary style to occupy the time of the college class-room and the University Seminary without importing others from philology which can be solved only by far different instruments. Literature can by no possibility render its highest service to the cause of education until it has been divorced from philology. The seminary of the latter must be distinct from that of the former, for the mental equipment of a critic of literature is distinct from that of a student of language and cannot be obtained by the same processes. The ability to exhibit the process of the English drama as an evolution, or to trace the influence of the romantic revival in England upon Transcendentalism in New England is one thing, and gives to the investigator no peculiar right or power to trespass upon philological preserves. Anyone who has mingled much with young students whose enthusiasm for the great things of literature has been kindled, cannot fail to have seen, and with distress, that many enter our Universities every year only to suffer dis-

comfort while there, and to leave with their hopes all unsatisfied. The principles that underlie modern literary criticism are not taught, because the time, in an over-burdened department will not permit. The thought and style of the most conspicuous and far-shining men-of-letters are subordinated in the class-room to the minute niceties of the language in which they wrote. In nearly every case where a student of strong natural ability is constrained to the simultaneous study of both philology and literature he will either love the one and hate the other, or hold to the one and despise the other. American Literature may be therefore highly serviceable in education because it admits of a complete severance of literature from philology.

The study of American Literature in our higher institutions would ultimately assist in the development of that literature, and would discipline in it the critical faculty. In the splendid progress of English criticism in the past twenty years America has not participated. SYMONDS'S 'Predecessors of Shakspeare,' SAINTSBURY'S explorations into Elizabethan literature, GOSSE'S studies in the transition-time from romantic to classical poetry in the late seventeenth century, take rank as creative work of no mean order. We are poorest of all in criticism. TUCKERMAN pleased us and we are content with WHIPPLE! When we think of the high service that trained and faithful interpreters of poetry render to a nation, it will be hard for us to over-rate the good results that might follow the extension of the English curriculum to include the genesis and brief history of American authorship. It is our precious property to hold the literature of our nation true to the higher ideals of life and its purpose. We may quicken a consciousness of the needs of that literature, and a devotion to it. We may re-awaken the old sentiments and aspirations that clung round the literature of the first half of the century, when the "coursers of the sun were just bounding from the Orient unbreathed," when the greatness of America was not her vast territory and boundless wealth, but when men would rather that America should beg her way along the highways of the nations and love the great invisible ideas of courage, patriotism, humanity! Such efforts in the class-room by men zealous for 'the giant things to come at large,' may yet avert from our literature a threatened second period of *conscious* dependence upon foreign models.

Again: the mutual action and reaction of the English and American Literatures from the beginning of the latter, make of

our Literature a highly interesting and important study.—The English teacher, who, by happy circumstance, pushes his class-work into the recent centuries finds in both prose and poetry new thoughts created, and new ideals animated by the emergence of a new continent beyond the seas. The “still-vex’d Bermoothes,” and “Virginia, Earth’s only Paradise” became familiar to the frequenters of the great theatre of the Elizabethans. MICHAEL DRAYTON bade the knights-errant of the ocean hail, and predicted of the new land that

“As there plenty grows
Of laurel everywhere,
Apollo’s sacred tree
You, it may see,
A poet’s brows
To crown, that may sing there.”

If there was a reflex influence upon England exerted by the discovery of the American continent, there was a much more interesting result attained by the growth of a transplanted scion of the Elizabethan stock in new surroundings and under novel conditions. Our first century is the story of dependence upon England. Our earliest poets, like BARLOW, FRENEAU, TRUMBULL and HOPKINSON, had no idea of instituting a literature in any respect different from that in which they had been born and taught:—

“They stole Englishmen’s books, and thought Englishmen’s thought,
With English salt on her tail, our wild eagle was caught.”

The study of our literature ought not to be begun, therefore, until the student has made some progress in English literature in its two important phases of Elizabeth and Anne. Our earliest prose continues the former, our first poetry reflects the latter. We must know ‘Hudibras’ to know ‘McFingal,’ as we must remember SWIFT to understand ‘Peter Porcupine.’ It became necessary for me, two years ago, to prepare a course of study in American Literature for pupils in the highest grade of our public school system. I could find no assistance anywhere, not so much as a hint; the oracles were dumb. The plans which I elaborated, experimented with, and abandoned as unsatisfactory were quite as many as the deserted chambers of DR. HOLMES’S mature Nautilus. My first surrender was of the entire first century, whose literary product I quickly found had no place in primary instruction. I then reorganized my class-work so

that it might begin with BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, but I still found such slow and wearisome progress, and such pinched and meagre results, that I was glad to take the advice of MR. GOSSE and omit entirely the prosy group of minor writers who fill up the greater part of the eighteenth century. Unless the class is at the same time occupied with American history, in which event some consideration of the orators and statesmen of the Revolution would be proper and profitable, it is, to my mind, best to begin the instruction in our literature with WASHINGTON IRVING. In 1807 FISHER AMES had declared it impossible for the American people ever to have a literature. The second year following began the refutation of Ames's assertion,—a refutation triumphantly complete throughout the century—1809 is the ever memorable date of the 'History of New York;' 1817 is similarly the first date in our true American poetry. It marks the appearance of *Thanatopsis* in the *North American Review*.

The object of literary studies in the lower schools should be to kindle the imagination, form the taste, and train the judgment. The work of the High School teacher is well done if he begets in his students a love for literature, and, in some degree, imparts to them the power of distinguishing between good and bad in literary form. The college professor receives from him a pupil who has read intelligently, and with eager interest, the best utterances of the American mind in the nineteenth century, and in whom there is firmly lodged an understanding of the essential fact, that American Literature is a continuation of English Literature, and that, when best and proudest, it is true to the great tradition of English thought and English style.

The first period of our history from the earliest colony until 1760, furnishes abundant task-work for the college student. It is a study of slow variations from the original type. It is interesting as the period of Origins: interesting, too, on the historical side, as illustrating character. It is a common error to suppose that the minds of the grim Puritans of Massachusetts Bay were as bare of all imagination as their meeting-house of ornament. It was, indeed, an age of prose. The colonists had no notion of the possibilities of romance about them. But beneath the grave and stern decorum of the countenance they wore, there lay the restless current of ambitious intellect.

JOHN HARVARD was not the only Puritan who had 'walked the studious cloisters pale,' nor MILTON the only one who dared

praise a living play-wright and live forever with the great imaginings of Shakespeare. There was never a better opportunity to study the growth of a national literature. Plymouth, Rhode Island, Maryland, the Carolinas, New York, a half score of colonies, were planted on the Atlantic coast between 1607, when the Cavaliers found lodgment in Jamestown, and 1682, when this fair state arose, the handiwork of the Quaker aristocrat, the protégé of royalty, who came from a very nest of literature, near the quiet spot where the greatest of the Puritans wrote those *minor* poems which are his *major* poems, near the grave of WALLER and the home of BURKE, by the country church-yard where the undying 'elegy' first breathed its marvellous notes. The different conditions and characters of these colonies would be the first theme for college study. Each held some one of the elements, that, perfected in retirement, were destined to combine and crown a new literature. For a century there was little intercourse between the colonists. The Cavalier built up his squirearchy in Virginia. The meeting-house became the centre of New England culture. There is a long, interesting, and most instructive series of changes through which English literary style passed in these isolated colonies, in the first hundred years, until the stress of political necessity translated the colonies into states, and a national accent was distinctly heard among the various voices of Cavalier, and Puritan, Quaker, Huguenot, and Catholic. The evolution is complete, all the laws of literary growth have been illustrated. It is the most instructive chapter in all the great book of literary history. And best of all the original documents exist and the student may be set upon the track of them. It may be made a master-key to the science of criticism.

Last of all, the profounder problems which should engage the University Seminary are not wanting. I have time to hint at but a few of them. The enormous influence exerted by the first colleges, notably Harvard, and William and Mary, and the foundation in which we are now assembled, established by the Philadelphia-Bostonian, our first cosmopolite. The new departure taken by political debate after the publication of COBBETT'S *Porcupine Gazette*, in which the spirit of SWIFT stirred and spoke, for COBBETT had learned the bitter trick of invective at home, in Farnham, within a stone's throw of SIR WILLIAM TEMPLE'S Moor Park where SWIFT lived in early years. French

liberalism introduced during the Revolution, wasting the bases of Puritanism, united with the new romantic poetry of England to form that curious feature in our literature which called itself Transcendentalism, and of which 'Brook-Farm' and the 'Dial' were interesting results. Biographical studies of such singular phenomena as THOREAU, and WHITMAN, and the history of the literary accomplishments of the Argonauts of '49, all present but the slightest suggestion of the work which would open up before the Seminary.

In BRYANT, equally with WORDSWORTH, may be studied the new way of regarding Nature which belongs to the nineteenth century, and is so actual an addition to our emotions. I mean the passionate love and adoration with which men regarded lonely nature. In BRYANT's later poems, too, as truly as in SHELLEY, is expressed the mutuality of man and nature, the one giving to and receiving from the other, the haunting consciousness that there is a power resident in nature that can restore our hearts. There is power for culture, and there are resources for education in the resplendent group of writers between 1830 and 1860. And they can be studied by us in a profounder sense than by any other people, even by our nearest kindred. I will not speak of HAWTHORNE, that exquisite flowering into the finest art of all that was weird and romantic in the superstitions of Puritanism, who can perhaps be thoroughly appreciated only by a New Englander: I will speak of EMERSON.

English scholars have, of late, labored mightily to account for the personality of EMERSON, and to fasten upon him a critical label. There can be no more conclusive proof that the guardianship and direction of the noble American literature that is to be, must rest mainly with American critics educated in our own schools, than the complete failure of the two most learned and skilful Englishmen, MATTHEW ARNOLD and JOHN MORLEY, to comprehend the place of EMERSON in American letters. He is worth more to us as an educational force than any modern European writer. Every book and lecture that emanated from his tranquil Concord home was a rebuke to our selfish materialism, summoning us back to legitimate pieties and purity of thought. But the great service of EMERSON to the ethics and intellect of America will not be complete until the literature he loved, and of whose future he had such prophetic glimpses and such unshaken hope, will be a power for culture in our schools, our colleges, and our University Seminaries, and then, too, we may expect the coming of the ideal national literature which LONGFELLOW foreshadowed in *Kavanagh* forty years ago.